

Columbia Astronauts Left Legacy of Faith

Rick Husband and Michael Anderson were members of Grace Community Church in Houston

After the Columbia spacecraft disintegrated on Feb. 1, international news media fulfilled space shuttle Commander Rick Husband's last wish. TV and newspaper reports widely reported the deep Christian faith of the 45-year-old astronaut, whose final pre-mission instructions to his pastor included the plea to "tell them about Jesus—He means everything to me."

His pastor, Steve Riggle of Grace Community Church in Houston, honored that request during a special memorial service for Husband and Columbia Payload Commander Michael Anderson, who also attended the charismatic church. Riggle spoke about heaven, and offered attendees tapes explaining how to have a relationship with Christ.

The astronauts' friends and relatives say they would have wanted the focus to be on Jesus, not on their personal accomplishments. "You can't talk to anybody who is close to either of them without the word 'humble' coming up," said Russell Naisbitt, men's ministry leader at Grace Community. "They were both unassuming, humble men."

"Mike loved what he was doing and was very focused. He was committed to his faith and family," said his wife, Sandy Anderson, in a videotaped interview with Riggle that was shown at the memorial service held at Grace Community. Anderson left behind two daughters: Sydney, 11, and Kaycee, 9.

“Rick had his priorities straight, and God made sure of that before we came here,” said Evelyn Husband, who became prayer partners with Sandy when their husbands were assigned to the mission. “Rick loved the Lord, and that was his first and foremost priority. My children and I were a very close second.”

Husband talked about his priorities in a recent videotaped interview with Riggle. He said that before becoming an astronaut, he received a letter from a friend who had been assigned to fly an airplane he had always wanted to pilot. In the letter, his friend referred to Psalm 37:4: “Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart.”

Husband said he felt God was asking him, “What are the desires of your heart?”

“Initially, the first thing that I brought to mind was I want to be an astronaut,” he said. “Then, it was like God said, ‘Think about it for a little while and tell me what really is the desire of your heart.’”

Husband said, “I finally came to realize that what meant the most to me was to try and live my life the way God wanted me to and to be a good husband to Evelyn and a good father to my children. ... It was like a light came on all of a sudden where I finally realized that this thing about being an astronaut was not as important as I thought it was.”

Despite a rigorous prelaunch schedule, Husband made devotional tapes that his two children (Laura, 12, and Matthew, 7) watched each of the 16 days he was in space and the day of the

landing.

Although the news about Columbia was devastating for Evelyn and Sandy, Riggle said, they have shown incredible strength and depth. "I can't think of anything worse than this," Evelyn said, "but He is carrying us through. ... My God is incredibly strong, and that's where my strength comes from."

Before the launch, Evelyn hosted a reception at Calvary Chapel in Merritt Island, Fla. Participating in the event were Steve Green, a Christian singer whom Husband met four years ago; Zola Levitt, a Jewish believer who heads up a teaching and evangelistic ministry; and Doug Stringer, founder of Somebody Cares, an inner-city ministry in Houston.

"Rick gave his witness in a very simple and natural way," Green said. "Some people make [spiritual] statements, and it's irritating because the rest of their life undermines it. Rick made those statements, and everyone quietly respected him because the whole of his life validated those statements."

Since the tragedy, Naisbitt said men in his home group have remarked that Husband and Anderson presented them with a challenge "to move to a deeper relationship with God—a higher level of consecration—so that people can view our lives the way we viewed theirs."

"I think their lives were like a seed that was planted, and we're going to watch and see what grows and becomes of this," said Sandy, noting the huge risks all of the astronauts were willing to take. "We need people who are willing to take those risks and climb those heights."

Michael FitzPatrick, an environmental systems flight controller for a NASA contractor, said his shift for STS-107 ended two days before the tragedy. When he saw the events unfold on the news, he was in disbelief. "As flight controllers, we're used to being the heroes—if something goes wrong, we fix it," he said. "In this case, we didn't get a chance."

A member of Grace Community, FitzPatrick has been involved in prayer groups at Johnson Space Center (JSC) for about 12 years. In 2001 he started walking the inner campus on Saturdays to pray for the staff. At the end of that year, he started a worship group that now meets every third Thursday on site.

After going through some significant red tape, he formed the "JSC Praise and Worship Club," and 20 to 60 people meet each month to have praise and worship during the lunch hour. Local pastors, he said, will be attending upcoming meetings to pray with those who would like personal prayer.

Stringer believes the recent tragedies in America are signs that "it is time to watch and pray," referring to 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11. "We should be preparing our hearts for the ark of His presence and preparing the church as an ark of refuge—for shakings are coming around the world. The body of Christ should be an ark of refuge for people coming to find their hope and answers in Christ."

Carol Chapman Stertzner in Dallas